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Book review

Forensic pathology for police, death investigators, attorneys and forensic scientists, Joseph Prahlow. Humana Press (2010), ISBN: 978-1-58829-975-8

This is a textbook that aims to provide an overview of forensic pathology to the non-forensic pathologist in allied fields. The first section is introductory, and provides overviews of the forensic pathology and its allied specialities. For example, the first chapter relates to “general histopathology” and the second to other forensic disciplines (e.g. entomology). There is an overview of anatomy and physiology including a very reasonable glossary from the common “household” terms to the rather unusual. This section terminates with a couple of chapters that relate to forensic pathology and death investigation systems in North America and are thus only really applicable to that region.

Overall this section provides a useful introduction to the topic, and although not exclusive to this book its coverage is broader. The overviews provided should be useful to non-medical practitioners, who have little understanding about the differences between forensic pathology and histopathology and other areas where the forensic pathologist is misunderstood to be an expert in all fields of forensic investigation.

The second section covers the “general topics in forensic pathology” and the third relates to “major causes/mechanisms of death”. These follow a formatted structure similar to other general texts in forensic pathology such as chapters on time of death (basically indicating that readers should hold a degree of scepticism) to gunshot wounds. Given the intended reader of the text the depth of the content is relatively superficial. However, the author is able to impart a considerable amount of information into a reasonable number of pages.

The photographs are in black & white and a little too small and a little bit dark and grainy; a feature that could easily be rectified in any subsequent edition. An accompanying CD-ROM encompasses

additional photographs in high detail but surprisingly my copy lacked those demonstrated in the original text. In its current state the quality of the photographs downgrades the quality of the accompanying text.

This book is missing something which I anticipated being covered when I saw the title. It covers the core basic issues very well, but the specific issues, the issues that matter to investigators and lawyers, are not raised. For example, how much force does a stab wound require to be inflicted, or how long does it take to cause death by manual strangulation. These are the type of questions that arise time and again following post-mortem examination or in court. Although there are no certain answers, the frequency the issues are raised warrants coverage in a book intended for recipients of a service. This could be included in the appropriate chapter or a new chapter of “difficult areas”.

Is this book more valuable to an investigator than the currently available textbooks? I would suggest that it could be considered more straightforward and a bit more basic than those texts intended for the practising forensic pathologist. This is to be commended. However, for not that much additional cost, a textbook in full colour with more detailed photographs and covering the difficult areas could be obtained. It would of course lack the valuable detail of the initial section. Overall this book is of value to its intended target and also to those starting out in forensic pathology, particularly in its approach of trying to explain the medical and pathological aspects to the non-medical, a valuable skill in those first forays in court. Simple improvement in the photographs and perhaps an additional chapter could be highly beneficial.

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